

PLAYING THE JOKER:
PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY AND ATTITUDES IN THE
STUDY OF JOKE PERFORMANCE

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This chap is driving along the highway, cruising along about fifty miles an hour. He looks in his mirror, and there's this three-legged chicken right on his tail. So he looks again and he thinks "Can't be true." And, eh, he's going with fifty. The next thing 's the chicken puts out his left wing, you see, "kushung" (noise of fast-moving car), overtakes him an' he can't believe it. This three-legged chicken is going flat out. And he puts his foot to the floor, a hundred and ten miles down the highway. This chicken is leaving him standing. And "chum" the right wing goes out an' then branches off the highway. He goes off as well, you see, out this country lane and he's tryin' to keep it in sight, roun' a corner. Next minute he screeches into this farmyard--no sign of the chicken. And there's this old boy sittin' there with a pipe in a rocking chair and he gets out and he says:

"Excuse me," he says, "did you see a three-legged chicken running through here?"

And the farmer says, eh

"Oh," he says, "ja, that must be one of mine."

"One of yours? You mean you've got more than one?"

He says: "Oh, ja, I, ehm, breed three-legged chickens."

"You, you breed three-legged chickens? Why, how?"

He said: "Well, there's three of us at home, the wife, and my son and I reckon, you know, if you want to have chicken for dinner, if we have three-legged chickens we can have a leg of chicken each!"

The guy, the guy is dumbfounded by this and he said:

"What, ehen, what does a three-legged chicken taste like?"

And he says:

"I really don't know," he says, "I've never been able to catch one of the bastards!"

This joke was told by Roy K. in the conversational setting of a dinner party.(1) Roy arrived in the United States in August, 1982, from Great Britain, to study for an M.A. in Speech Communication at an American university. My husband and I got to know Roy (aged 23) through a program for foreign students. As we got to know him better, he began to share his large store of anecdotes, quips and jokes with

us. In Britain, Roy had participated in many debating tournaments and his rhetorical skill showed itself clearly in his joke telling.

The following paper will combine an analysis of conversational joke telling with a more extensive look at the joke teller. Sociolinguistic analyses have provided some insights into the conversational dynamics of joke telling (Sacks 1974), yet information on the narrator, his attitudes and preferences provide a framework beyond the technical aspects of joke telling. Alan Dundes has suggested that folklorists include in their collection and analysis of folklore the informants' personal insights in the meaning of their folklore, terming this "oral literary criticism" (Dundes 1966). In the same vein I interviewed Roy about his performance strategies, and the "oral rhetorical criticism" gleaned will hopefully provide a fuller perspective on his joke telling.(2)

Roy's repertoire and style were unknown in the student community he encountered in America. He felt himself placed in the role of a joker, though he estimates his joke delivery back home to be "okay, but average, nothing great, nothing drastic."(3) While in America, he acquired a reputation as the fellow who "tells jokes to illustrate everything" and he noticed that his new friends regarded his sense of humor as a defining part of his identity. Roy's reaction was to exploit this image as much as possible, since the "worst thing they could do would be to send me back home!" His accent, as well as his idiomatic expressions, singled him out further, though they also provided material for his growing repertoire of stories about "things that happened to me in America."

Successful joke telling is also useful in Roy's profession. In Britain, he participated in debating tournaments, and as a result was aware of the use of jokes as a conscious rhetorical tool:

I've got a piece of paper somewhere which is just debate jokes which you slot into any speech; I got a file at home with them listed alphabetically... These kind of work well rhetorically, you know, dozens of these, literally dozens and dozens.

As an example, Roy offered the following:

...like "was it my imagination or did I hear during Mr. X's speech someone call out from the back of the hall 'give us Barabbas?'"

However, this particular tradition is a highly dynamic one:

None of these I could use [in a British debate], because they would shout out the punchline and shout me down before I got half-way through the joke, so you have to try to think up original ones.

Though Roy thinks it was only with his stay in the United States that his joke telling became a conscious part of his identity, he does have a distinct sense of having gained a "humorous profile:"

At high school I used to be regarded as funny, but when I got to university, I realized I was exceedingly dull, because what goes down well in front of a high school audience, just bombs completely at a university where you got people who have been there for four years and are expert.

It took him about three years at the university until he felt he had gained adequate competency. What now passes as a neat and polished style of delivery reflects the pay-off of a lengthy learning period:

Over here, all the jokes I tell are from Britain, so they are kind of well-rehearsed and I watched other people tell them, get an idea what's the best way to tell them.

Roy consciously thinks about a joke's structure only "as the crucial bits are coming up." He has grown careful to avoid blunders, as the following transcript shows. In one instance, this particular joke "backfired" due to his initial delivery.

The Advert in the Newspaper

Setting: A dinner at our apartment. Present were Roy (R), T. and his wife, my husband and I.

Previous conversation: Roy was a teaching assistant, and he related how he had been called to the department chair's office because the mother of one of his students had complained that he had told a dirty joke in class. Roy had used the joke as an example of the difference between verbal and nonverbal communication:

R: So I told them this very clever joke, you see?

(laughter and giggles)

So (laughs himself), there're some freshmen and sophomores sittin' there, so (laughter)

I said, a woman is married three times and divorced three times (pause). And her first husband leaves her, so she divorces him, and her second husband beats her up, so she divorces him, and her third husband is no good in bed, so she divorces him.

(soft laughter)

So she decides to try to get married for a fourth and final time. So she puts an advert in the local newspaper: "Wanted: a husband"--

T: (giggles) It's logical as anybody...

(all laugh)

R: (laughs) "Wanted: a husband"; the only three criteria being that one you mustn't leave me, two you mustn't beat me up, and three you must be very good in bed. So, various people answer the advert, and... no good. So she's just about given up completely (pitying stress) and she's sittin' in her house one day (pause), and, ah, the doorbell rings and...

(T. giggles)

She answers the door and there's this guy on the doorstep and he's got no arms and no legs. So she smiles and she say(s): "Yes, can I help you?" He says: "Yes, I'm here to answer your advert." So she bursts out laughing (laughs) and she says: "Oh, come on! (mocking voice) You know, look at you--you've got no arms!" And he says: "Well, I can't beat you up, can I?" She said: "But you've got no legs!" He said: "Well, I mean--can't leave you either, can I?" "I mean, no arms, no legs, how could you be any good in bed?" she said. "Well, I rang the doorbell all right, didn't I?" (with macho intonation, changing immediately into laughter).

(all laugh)

So there's a phone call of complaint to the chairman's office (laughs). I thought I demonstrated it quite vividly! (in mock defense)...you know, they'll certainly remember that there's a difference between verbal and nonverbal...

T: They'll never forget that! I bet they got that straight for the rest of their lives!

(laughter and clearing of throats)

In an earlier telling, this joke was spoiled before Roy reached the punchline, greatly distressing him and making him very aware of how he had to build the story for it to be a success:

Well, that backfired once, because I said "She heard the ring of the doorbell, and she answered it and there's this guy with no arms and no legs" and somebody said: "How did he ring the doorbell?"--End of joke! Now, I don't know how I pat that around, but now I don't emphasize the fact that the doorbell rings...and you know, you kind of build up a scene focusing on her and then just throw in the fact that "she answers the door" after the bell's rung.

The transcript affirms the strategy outlined by Roy: the woman is the focus of the entire opening scene, and before letting the doorbell ring, Roy carefully first mentions the woman sitting in her house.

The joke was told in the conversational setting that Roy considers best for telling jokes, namely "after dinner...you've had a few drinks, and you're just going through the wine, great, that's the best audience, always." This setting is also conducive for situational or --as he calls them--"anecdotal" jokes, a kind he prefers over shorter ones:

The quick ones, you can tell someone when you just bump into them. But I tend to keep the anecdotal ones for people I know, people I like, 'cause I like to enjoy the joke with them.

Anecdotal jokes allow for the build-up of character which Roy regards as essential for narrating something that should be humorous.(4) He feels American humor is not so funny, because it "is like quick, quick, quick; there's no build-up of character." The physical surroundings, the time and particularly the relationship to the audience determine whether Roy is stimulated to narrate a joke, and his wish to enjoy the joke with his audience indicates a "sharing" attitude: after a shared meal and while sharing drink, he is willing to share a joke.(5) Though he likes occasionally to be the center of attention, he much prefers to listen to other's witty narratives. However, once he temporarily accepts the role of performer, he does so very convincingly:

The American Tourist in London

Setting: In Roy's dorm room, shortly before the Johnny Carson T.V. show. Present are Roy (R), John (J), and I.
Previous Conversation: Roy has been invited to speak at a club in Indianapolis and he tells a joke he plans to use during that speech.

TEXT

R: All right, 'cause that is one of my all-time favorite jokes; did I tell you that one, I'm thinking of tellin' this one on Friday, this it's--not so much a usual kind of joke---

J: I, I hope you don't tell the one about the armless and legless man ringing the doorbell! (loud laughter from all)

R: Eh, about the American tourist that goes to London? Did I tell you this?

I: No

J: Mm

R; And, ... eh, hen he, he goes into some bar in London 'n' has a few drinks and then he's going to the theater. 'N he's going to see Agatha Christie's The Mousetrap, you know...

I: Mhm

R: One of the great all-time whodunits, you know it's --And he comes out of the pub, an' he's trying to hail a taxi and it starts raining, and it just rains and rains and rains--the middle of the summer. And he's soaked to the skin and he can't get a taxi in, I mean you know what London's like when it's, no taxis, no, no when it's raining, not taxis available. He eventually gets a taxi. By this time he is soaked. So he gets into the taxi, you know an' he says, "take me to whatever theater The Mousetrap runs at."

J.+I.: (sniffing laughter)

R: So--The guy's driving him along. And the whole way long the journey, 'e curses the English summer weather, you know, the rain and the fact that ye can't get a taxi, and the streets flood and there's no one to help you and it's just awful, you know, the whole thing is a bloody disaster from start to finish. An' he moans about the taxi drivers, London and the weather and ooah... and English summer, it's all just hopeless. The taxi driver is not saying a word. And they arrive at the theater an' he drops him off at the front door of the theater and he gets out and says "okay, how much is that?" (pause) So he tells him the price, so he pays him an' he doesn't even give him a tip. An' he turns around and as he's walking into the theater, the taxi driver winds down the window and he looks out an' he 's out (shouts out): "Excuse me, guvnor!" And he says "yeah, what is it now?" And he says "It was the detective that did it." (pause) (laughter from all)

PARALINGUISTIC TEXTURE

raised, urging voice, starting on "did," then falls into lower, explaining voice.

last words laughingly

slightly sarcastic, raising intonation, "out-of-joke" voice for "did I...," higher intonation.

slower speed, voice more delicate, clear enunciation.
expectant tone on "theater," speed a bit faster.
stress on "Mousetrap," then falling intonation

laughing on "it's"
with astonishment, forced yet quiet stress.
faster speed, slight excitement.
starting with "you know...," voice shifts to "documentary" mode.

voice quieting down, withdrawing on "available."
normal stress starting on "he"; "soaked" set apart, stress, but almost whispering, tense. Exhaustion and indifference reflected in the voice in speech to taxi driver.

clears his throat after "so"
urging, pitiable voice sequence.
fast, stressed words provide rhythm to the lament.

increasing anger, culminating in "awful."

disgusted groan
sudden fall on "hopeless."

question in impatient voice

scornful on "tip."

Cockney accent imitation. "Excuse" drawn out, loud though polite. American loud, impatient. Punchline clearly enunciated, followed by immediate laughter.

The transcript, though lacking appropriate terminology for the paralinguistic texture, illustrates how skillfully content and texture are manipulated to support and complement each other. After assuring himself that the audience has not heard the joke before, Roy begins to set the first scene. The American enters a bar and consumes a few drinks. His plans to see The Mousetrap are mentioned next, and Roy's voice expresses enthusiasm and joyful expectation on the part of the tourist. Agathie Christie's The Mousetrap first appeared in a volume entitled Three Blind Mice and Other Stories (1948): the play is performed exclusively in London, making it a natural tourist attraction, its unbroken run and popularity apparently also providing a source of amusement for the natives. The sudden rain, however, begins to alter the mood of the traveler. Faced with the true character of London, his frustration increases and he finds a welcome target in the person of the taxi driver. Roy's voice has in the meantime gradually shifted from empathy to anger to slight annoyance, as the story changes its focus from the tourist to the taxi driver. Yet the taxi driver remains quiet, despite the reported outburst on the part of the tourist. At the height of the dramatic tension, the taxi driver speaks. The drastic turn of the finale is reinforced by the imitation of a Cockney accent, lending an authenticity to the driver's punchline.

Roy has further rhetorical use for this joke:

And the great thing is, I intend to emphasize to these shits on Friday, the great thing about that joke is, once you've told it, you can then always add: "And so I'm afraid I've ruined the Mousetrap if you ever get to London!"

Seemingly delighting the audience with a joke, he has the added power of ruining the audience's potential viewing of the play. As a British citizen, talking to an American audience, Roy is doing to his audience what the taxi driver does to the tourist: he expresses indirectly his superiority.

Humor is an essential part of Roy's character, even though he relies on it as a strategic, professional tool:

I'm actually very serious about humor. I do have a, kind of a homespun philosophy about humor. The only people I worry about or am never sure about are the ones who haven't got a sense of humor, or the ones who've got a sense of humor in everything except against themselves, or the ones who have a sense of humor except about religion, or race, or politics, or sex, or whatever it might be. People who've got particular kinds of hang-ups about certain kinds of humor. I don't like that --very dubious. So the best politicians, I think, are the ones who can laugh at themselves; suppose in that sense Ronald Reagan is an excellent politician; ...'s a bit worrying, come to think! (laughs). Maybe I should revise that philosophy! Scrap that!... Another piece of advice I got in terms of humor is that: one thing very few women have a defense against [is] somebody who can really make them laugh. Not in the sense that you're sittin' there, God, what, you know "what ridiculous shit is this guy," but somebody who can really amuse them. ...I guess if people laugh, they feel more relaxed. ...Another person I don't like, and this is connected with joke, is somebody who doesn't laugh at jokes. ...If you feel relaxed with people, nine times out of ten you're not afraid a joke is gonna bomb.

Judging by this "testimony," humor is a strategy for life in general. Roy plans to spend his life as a politician and he feels that a certain amount of distance from the self is good politics, both for his professional future and for his future designs on women: humor is a test of other peoples' hang-ups, helping Roy to define his relationships to others.

Roy estimates that his repertoire contains at most fifty situational jokes. He likes political jokes "that are funny, but there's not many of those, is there?" On further reflection he admits that probably most of the jokes he tells are about sex or religion. He has a few favorites, led by "the wide-mouth toad joke" which he tells with gusto, contrasting the toad's initial "broad" speech (which he imitates by using his fingers to broaden his mouth) with a particularly pointed British accent in the final line (cf. Dundes 1980). "The American Tourist in London" also figures prominently, especially now that he himself is consistently

exposed to Americans. Both these jokes contain play on regional speech variation. Roy's preference for such jokes may be connected to the fact that he has made speech a central feature of his life. The large number of sexual and religious jokes may be related to his age, the fact that he is unmarried, and his relaxed attitude towards Catholicism.

Ideally, a more extensive examination of Roy's art should also include feedback from his audiences. Information on other jokers in his family would round out the picture even further. Transcription and analysis of a greater number of jokes would illustrate Roy's narrative technique, and his commentary and insights would be equally valuable. One rarely has the opportunity to question a joke teller about his rhetorical techniques, and few informants are inclined to converse with a collector on such a self-examining level. On the other hand, it seems sensible to record an informant's own perceptions of what he thinks he is doing instead of guessing or imposing a scholar's view of the situation.⁽⁶⁾ Studying one teller offers a possibility for understanding and appreciating idiosyncracies in style and repertoire. Observing Roy's narrative skills within a conversational framework provided a natural performance context, from which further insights could be gained.

In addition to analyses of joke cycles (such as Dundes & Abrahams 1969), individual joke tellers, their attitudes towards themselves and their repertoire and style should also be studied. In an ideal case, a narrator should be observed over a lifetime to understand the growth and decline of a repertoire, as well as the teller's adaptations to changing communities and audiences. Given the age of both informant and folklorist, another version of this paper might be expected in thirty years...

Notes

1. The name and identifying characteristics have

been altered.

2. Toelken's work with Yellowman has been most successful at eliciting informant input in analysis (1976).

3. Interview conducted on April 7, 1983. The three joke transcripts were recorded in conversational settings on different occasions.

4. See Anton Ehrenzweig as paraphrased by Douglas (1968) on aesthetic pleasure in wit.

5. Douglas states: "Laughter and jokes, since they attack classification and hierarchy, are obviously apt symbols for expressing community in this sense of unhierarchized, undifferentiated social relations " (1968:375).

6. This is my only criticism of Sacks' otherwise meticulous analysis of a joke telling in conversation (1974). He presents the data without taking in account the context of the telling--a therapy session. Furthermore he offers rather generalized conclusions: "...jokes... are commonly accompanied by an indication of whom the current teller received them from (1974:353). Roy, however, did not make such attributions, unless he was specifically asked for them. The majority of tellers I have met prefer to pass off jokes as "theirs," as admitting the source would lessen their own creativity in the eyes of the audience.